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toward.



WEDNESDAY'S CHILDREN

There is nothing very distinctive about Wednesdays. They are neither the day before nor the day after anything, but exist eternally between. Wednesdays are not to be enjoyed, only endured.

Randy Mason tossed the burning ember of a cigarette butt into the gutter adjacent to the school auditorium. His sister should have already finished her rehearsal. It wouldn't have been so bad if the sacrifice had been in the name of art, but to wait out there in the cold for a damn high school production of Our Town was inexcusable. As Randy moved his hand through his hair, vaguely straightening the black curly mop located on the top of his head, he heard the sounds of exodus.

Laura Mason appeared from the chorus of thespians and ran towards her brother's black '57 Chevrolet. Her voice began to sound as soon as she opened the car door and popped into the front seat. "I'm sorry you had to wait. I know it's awfully cold out here."

"That's all right. How did the practice go tonight?"

"Pretty well, except for that wretched Stage Manager. You know he hasn't even learned his lines yet! Two more days until the performance, and he hasn't even learned his lines yet!"

Randy offered his sister a cigarette from a brightly colored pack, and she promptly selected one. For a while they remained in silence as the red tips of the freshly lit cigarettes illuminated the darkness like two small, burning coals.

As the car pulled away from the school grounds, Laura studied the rough complexion and awkward features that constituted her brother's face. She had always been fond of Randy in a crazy sort of way. There was a definite bond between the two of them which sometimes seemed completely hidden by a maze of incongruities.

"You want a coke?" Randy quietly asked as he flipped the ash of his cigarette out the open window.

"Yeah, that would be fine."

Randy pulled into one of those little hamburger restaurants that specialize in curb service for teen agers and ordered two cokes.

"Henry came in drunk again tonight, and Mother has been bitching at him." At twenty years of age, Randy felt himself sufficiently mature to call his father "Henry."

"Oh, Randy, you really ought not to be so harsh on them."

"Harsh, hell! I'm not being harsh. I'm just telling you what happened--that's all."

"Well, it's not like he was an alcoholic or anything."

"Listen, honey, he could tell the A.A. things about booze they never even dreamed of."

"You've always hated him, haven't you?" Laura quietly questioned.

"I don't hate the poor bastard; I just feel sorry for him. Really I do. I just feel sorry for him."

The waitress returned with an aluminum tray containing two white paper cups. Randy paid her and handed one of the cups to Laura as he took a healthy sip out of the other.

"Are you coming to see the play Friday night?" Laura inserted in a cheerful attempt to change the subject.

"I don't know if I could stomach all that melodramatic bunk."

"Oh, Randy, do you always have to be so damn critical? Can't you just enjoy something without analyzing the life out of it? Come see it. Hear? It's really a good play."

"Listen, honey, I'm glad as hell that you've found your life in the theatre, but I've read the play. I know all about that 'Goodbye Grovers Corners, Goodbye dear sweet and beautiful and lovely life' business. So just don't tell me it's a great play. Hear? I know better than that."

Laura's disappointment was not difficult to read in her face. But she didn't say anything. She just remained silent.

"Reach in the glove compartment and hand me that bottle." Laura complacently obeyed the request and handed him the bottle of Old Stag bourbon. Randy poured the bourbon into the top part of his paper cup and stirred the drink with his finger. Laura declined her brother's offer of bourbon, but accepted another cigarette.

"What gets me," Randy began once more, "is that the poor bastard can't realize that he's an alcoholic. He won't face up to his problem. He's losing patients every day, and can't even realize it."

"Do you really think he's an alcoholic, Randy?"

"Honey, he's been on a downhill track for ten years. He comes home in the middle of the day because he's too drunk to receive patients. Sometimes he doesn't go to his office for a straight week. And what really gets me, what really makes me want to puke, is that Mother still thinks

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I'm twelve years old. She still gives me those little speeches about what a fine doctor he is, and how all this is just a sickness that he's going to overcome."

Laura took a timid puff from her cigarette and allowed the smoke to escape her mouth and travel aimlessly towards the roof of the car before she spoke. "Mother has had a lot to put up with in these last few years."

"And I guess that lousy remark was aimed at me. Randy Mason, the bright, ugly little boy, who doesn't even have enough strength of character to stay in college." Randy took a big swig from the paper cup and felt the heat of the whiskey, which had not been effectively mixed with the coke, burn all the way down to his stomach.

"Why do you think that everything I say is directed at you? Randy, you've got to get a hold of yourself. You're well on the road to becoming a nervous wreck." Laura tasted her coke and crumpled her half-smoked cigarette out in the car's ash tray.

"Thank you, Miss Freud, for your amazing analysis of my mental condition. I really think you ought to be a psychiatrist. Your perception is uncanny!" Randy reached into the glove compartment and pulled out the bourbon to replenish his diluted drink.

After a few minutes of silence, Laura spoke. "Listen, Randy, it's only ten o'clock now. Let's drive down town. I don't feel like going home right away." Randy muttered a brief acquiescence and aimed the car towards town.

As they reached the crest of the mountain, separating the suburb from the main city, the entire business district came into view. The strings of lights appeared as drops of clear water against a background of carbon.

Randy had dropped out of the University the year before, not because of his grades, but because he was sick of the life there. His courses didn't seem like an education, but just meaningless duties which he was being forced to perform. He had held several jobs in the past, but had been fired from his most recent one two weeks earlier.

"Do you want to know what I really think drove him to it?" Randy's voice broke the silence.

"What?" Laura asked with the quiet impatience of one who cannot hold back the inevitable.

"It's that religious kick she's been on. She never was so Goddamn pious when we were growing up. But all of a sudden during my sophomore year in high school, she becomes religiously inspired. I don't blame the poor bastard. God knows, if I had to put up with a female Isaiah every night, I'd be an alcoholic too. Hell, I'd be worse. I'd be a raving maniac."

Randy pulled the car up to another restaurant and bolted inside. He returned shortly with another large coke. Before he entered the car, he dumped half of the paper cup's contents onto the cement pavement.

"Hand me that bottle again, please," Randy requested when he had returned behind the steering wheel. Laura filled the half empty coke with the bourbon. The '57 Chevrolet jerked to a start and moved on down Twentieth Street.

"Randy?" Laura began softly as she scratched the wax off the side of her paper cup with her fingernail. "Do you believe in God?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I want to know, because I don't think I do."

Randy turned and looked at his sister. She was staring intently towards the front, still scratching the wax off her cup. Randy became really aware of his sister's presence for the first time during that evening.

"Why, yes. Yes, I think I do. I didn't use to. For a long time, for about three or four years, I didn't. And then I came to a kind of realization. Mother would probably call it a religious experience or something. But it wasn't like that. I don't believe in her kind of God. It was after I had been reading about some of the Eastern religions, I came to this realization that everything--I mean everything in this whole lousy universe: the good, the bad, the mental and the physical--it's all God. And there's some purpose in it."

"I don't know. I don't always believe that. It's just every once in a while. Sometimes I think I'd go crazy if I didn't believe it."

Laura fumbled into her brother's shirt pocket and retrieved a cigarette. She punched in the car lighter and sipped on her coke.

"You want to know something crazy?" Laura asked as she pushed the squatty lighter hard against the end of her cigarette.

"What?"

"Do you remember that time when we all went to Florida? I must have been about twelve. Anyway, it was about the only vacation the whole family ever took together."

"Yeah, sure; I remember."

Laura inhaled deeply and blew the smoke slowly from her mouth and nostrils. "Well, you showed me the first sea gull I had ever seen. I thought it was the most savage and, for that reason, the most beautiful animal I had ever seen. Well, I got this crazy idea that God was like a sea gull. Only God wasn't white. He was as black as carbon. And He hovered above us like the gulls hover above the fish. And everytime we do something wrong, every-

time we refuse to follow one of the rules that the black bird has imposed upon us, He swoops down and devours us. I know all this must sound crazy to you. But sometimes when I think of God, usually when I really believe that He exists, I still think He is a sea gull."

Randy was both saddened and delighted by his sister's words. He was saddened to discover the loneliness of the only other person in the world that he really cared about. He was delighted to discover his sister's poetic insight and much more important, their bond of loneliness and despair. Randy felt a sensation of relief, and for the first time in several weeks the gnawing nervousness that had been plaguing him disappeared.

But, Laura, don't you understand that the sea gull is only your realistic way of perceiving Mother's type of God? It has physical characteristics, and it's limited. It doesn't judge our morality, but only our ability to blindly follow a set of rules.

I could never believe in a God like that. I can only believe in an all encompassing God that is the universe, and our bodies, and our minds, and everything. And if He makes a judgement on us, He would judge us for what we are and what we do, not for what we don't do."

No, Randy, you're wrong about one thing. There is a very great difference between my sea gull and Mother's God. You don't pray to the gull; you only try to escape it."

They traveled in silence for some time. Laura puffed nervously at her cigarette, knocking off the ashes always before there was a need, and making sure that the end of the burning white object was round and clean. Randy had completely relaxed into the cushion of the car seat.

They were only a few miles from home when Randy spoke to her again. I don't know exactly how to say this, Laura. But I know what you mean by the sea gull. I know this is only a part of it, but up until this year I have left you alone with them." Randy spoke of his parents as if they were an indistinct but, nevertheless, an altogether real enemy.

Randy sat stiffly now, looking straight ahead through the windshield. He spoke the next words as if he were giving a memorized speech. "I left you alone with them during the worst part of it--during those two years when they were worst off, and you needed me most."

Randy, there's no sense in you blaming yourself for that. You had to go to college."

I didn't have to go to college, and I don't have to go back to college now."

But, Randy, you had one of the highest averages of your graduating class. You were the best English student Gravemont High School ever had. And besides, you won that good scholarship to the University."



"What the hell has all that got to do with you?" Randy seemed irritated at the interruptions. "Please let me finish.

"Any, you had to live with them for those two miserable years while I was off wasting my scholarship. And so, you've had a lot rougher time than I had. I just wanted to say that I think you have done a damn good job. You're about the only sane one in this family of idiots."

Randy pulled his Chevrolet up into the Mason driveway and took the last swallow of his bourbon. The children sat in the darkness of the car staring at each other. Randy almost wished that Laura was not his sister, so that he could actually fall in love with her and marry her. There was a slight tinge of physical desire in his thought, but it was more of a fleeting premonition that Laura would be the only girl he would ever understand or even feel close to.

"You don't know how much I appreciate your thought, Randy. But really, it hasn't been that bad. Father never causes a scene when he's drunk, and I get along with Mother fine, religious kick or no religious kick. I think you're exaggerating. All families have a few skeletons in their closets. Ours is really pretty normal."

"Yeah, sure, kid," Randy remarked briskly as he got out of the car. The Mason children walked silently into their house together.

"Hey, Laura?" Randy stopped her as she began to walk upstairs.

"Yeah?"

"Could you save me a ticket for the play, Friday night?"

"Of course. I'll get you the best seat in the house." Laura smiled and walked upstairs.

Randy did not feel that he could possibly go to sleep now. He was wide awake. For the first time that evening, he became aware of the liquor he had consumed. He walked into the living room and stared at his father's liquor cabinet. He had never tasted his father's whiskey before; now he suddenly felt that the old man owed him a drink.

In the kitchen he got a clean glass, went back to the cabinet and poured himself a drink of his father's best Scotch. He returned the bottle and tasted the expensive liquid. Randy had just about decided that he had finally developed a taste for Scotch, when he heard his father's voice behind him.

"Haven't I told you never to drink my whiskey without asking me first?" Randy turned around to see a fat little man with sparse white hair, wearing a checked bathrobe over a pair of gray pajamas. "Well, haven't I?" Dr. Mason repeated.

"Yes, I guess you have," Randy answered insolently and yet with a degree of fear in his voice. "Would you like me to pay you for it?"



"Randy, I'm about to lose my patience with you." Dr. Mason's voice showed that he had just awakened from the sleep that had deadened the drunkenness of the earlier part of the evening. "If you weren't a young man with so much potential, I might understand."

"Well, then, why don't you try to understand this." Randy bravely took a swallow of his father's Scotch. He felt the evening's whiskey blur the normal quickness of his mind. "Try to understand that I don't give a damn about all your money. You think you're such a successful man, but you're really a complete failure."

Randy knew that he would regret what he was saying Thursday morning. But this was Wednesday night and it had to come out. "And it's not the drinking either that I mind. That's secondary. What is important is that you've never given your children anything to live by. You've never given them anything that will have meaning after you're in the grave."

By this time, Randy realized that he was almost shouting and decided that he had said quite enough.

Dr. Mason stood, stunned and silent. He looked at his son as David must have looked at Absalom, with unbelief but also with a feeling of great loss. There was nothing that he could have said that would have changed or challenged his son's last words.

"I'm not a very religious man," Dr. Mason said in a tone that attempted to suggest that he really was; "but I'm going to ask your mother to pray for you." The old man walked quietly and tiredly back upstairs to his bedroom.

Randy sat down on the floor and stared blankly at the bottom part of Dr. Mason's liquor cabinet. He sat stiffly and motionlessly, and the words escaped his mouth as if he were a mechanical toy, incapable of pronouncing any others. "The poor bastard. The poor bastard. May God have mercy on his soul."

--Walter Ellis



RIVER JUSTICE

Beneath the mighty Appalachian chain
Which thunders down on Dixie from the East,
There lies a soft-green valley, cut into
By the misty, muddy, winding Tennessee,
Which feeds and floods the valley.

1

There is no way to know which case will be.
One year the current brings blue channel cat;
Next fall the damned thing overflows, driving
Cotton farmers from their huts on the banks---
Then freezes up and watches.

2

I used to look down on the river from
My favorite place, about eight miles away---
A little ledge swept by the wind and carved
In the side of a mountain I won't name
For fear you'd come and find it.

3

They blamed the river's mood on me because
They knew I'd been there. So they ran me out.
I! Who've known the river a hundred years;
I've ~~seen~~ it overrun by Indians,
And muddied with the blood of slaves!

4

I watched them scrambling up the mountain side,
Brandishing their torches and screaming, "Witch!"
Grown men and women, hell-fire in their eyes.
They'd lost their crops and here they came at me,
Crying and telling the legend.

--David C. Vest



THE FISH

(This story is affectionately dedicated
to Ronny Countryman, who told it to me.)

Why do you run through the woods, dark haired child of Alabama? Do you seek your mother and father? They've been dead for many years. If you run through the deep woods for them, run to the west and over the hill, run past the cedar trees and over the brown pine needles, run to the grave, child. Duck your head, child; or your dark braids will twine in the low-hanging trees.

"Not my mother or father, sir; not them. I belong to the living."

Why do you run through the woods, slim, strong girl? Do you run for the heat of your blood? Do you run to send rosy beauty in your tanned Cheek?

"No, for it's summer, and we keep no fire, even in our home. And, I would not run for beauty."

O, she would not run for beauty, for she has the deer's dark eye. Her forehead has the spring of a temple arch and her neck the snake's easy sway. From her belt as she runs, fall white daisies, placed at her waist in the morning by a fairer hand. Her black braids whip the warm air; a tear knows the curve of her cheek.

Why do you sew your path with tears, dark, delving girl? For whom do you weep and run?

"For the soul of my brother, and for a fish and for a dream I had of this day."

Speak of your brother and of the fish, and of the dream you had of this day. Tell as you run, soft-lipped girl.

"I can speak no word till I save them all. Lay your ear to my footsteps in the sand; know my path back under the fine, firm trees."

And she leaped into the air, leaning and lithe.

She left no real footstep in the red sand of Alabama--less than half a footstep: five small rounds in a line, and five more. Five beyond a bramble bush and five in a boulder centuries old.

I laid my lips to the dust. I wept five tears.

God save us all, I prayed, and placed my head in her path.



"For many years my brother and I lived only in the woods, away from the roads and rivers. I loved the woods, the dark, thick woods, and he followed the paths that I made. We ran faster than foxes, climbed quicker than squirrels. I know the caves that crouch under the hill, and there we glide like the bats."

(I shivered in the sand and stirred in my sleep. Had that goblin-child's braid hit my neck like a fang?)

"Once we two had played all day in the cave shaped like a rose. We'd sung with the echo and swum in the stream, he pulled moss from the walls, laid it upon the hard floor and put smooth stones 'round the border. Then he told me to sleep, and he would watch. We would not go home that night."

Wood's child, where would you go home in all of Alabama? A weathered, empty house among the pines? An unweeded grave yard up on the hill? All the darkies feared you, and the other thought you safely in the grave. Where would you go home?

I would have stroked your small dark head. From far up the path, she seemed to sob at my kindness. I left the print of her foot—five salty cups--and ran under the trees, bent down small like a child.

Wait for me, child; together we'll find your brother.

God save the fish and her dream.

A toad squatted under a mushroom, and a bright red berry sat in the center of green leaves.

"Why do you run through the woods, bent man?" they asked. "Where are the shoes for your fast, firm feet?"

I stepped close to the toad and unseated the berry as my ankle swept near its chair; for the child lay across the path--on one side lay her long slim feet propped on a rotting log; she opened her eyes from the clay.

I lifted the lass, the small still lass, and placed her on my galloping heart.

Over my arm hung her long dark braids, swaying to our galloping gait.

And I knew of her brother, of the fish, and the fearful dream of her heart.

Thomas left his sister in her sweet brown bed in the cave, though it was his custom to follow the girl through the dark; he walked carefully on his toes down deeper and deeper into the cave, to the pool that lay far in the earth. He kneeled on the edge and leaned his face over the water, and watched. The cave and the black made a hood for his head: he could not look under the edge.



Suddenly light uncurled in the water and skated across the pool.

"Wait for me! For me, for me, me...me." His voice hung and rung in the air.

The girl turned in her bed, touching her cheek on a cool-sided stone. As she raised her head, she looked down in the gloom and saw Thomas standing by the edge of the water, watching a glow dim and disappear.

"Thomas, take care," she called, and she ran through the room on her small strong legs and shortly stood at his side.

"There was a light, a soft, flowing light."

"Yes, I know," she answered, "for I saw him in my dream. It is the king of all fishes. He visits the caves, but his home is beyond our house and beyond the hill and in the water just under the bridge."

"I would like to see the fish again."

She took him by the hand and led him out of the cave up into the green light of Alabama. Faster than foxes and quicker than squirrels they came to their old weathered house. The girl glided in and baked bread and corn for their meal.

She brought the bowl to Thomas who sat on the step, and he smiled at his small dark sister. They sat on the step on the old gray house with a blue bowl between them. He pointed at robins and jays and drew in the dust with a stick, and she gazed at the work of his eye.

Then the stick drew a curve like the back of a mountain and placed on it sudden peaks. It drew a round eye and a grim old mouth. And the girl and he looked for the fish.

"Thomas, the fish is not for you," she said. "He's wild and strong and anciently clever."

Thomas laughed at the girl and put his hand on her head, put his hand on her small, dark head.

She mounted the step and stood in the breezeway between the two old rooms, and then went to the right to nap away the afternoon.

As the door creaked after her heel, Thomas bent over the bowl and took the bread that was left.

He walked around the house that stood on its crumbling brick legs and stood at the foot of the hill, not needing to look. On the top of the hill were the graves; six were sunken; five had a rusty fence; four had only a board for a marker; three were under the fir; and two lay very flat and their dust was lined into robins and jays and daisies and bats.



He walked beyond the graves and down the hill; he crossed a red clay road and went back in the woods at a grove of silver-leaved maple trees. The sun shone full and strong on Thomas of Alabama, and sometimes he pinched a crumb from the bread and dropped it for the ants, and sometimes he ate it himself. He felt the sand grow moist under his feet and curled his toes. He picked a reed and stuck it behind his ear--pretending it was a fine brush. And he came to the bridge and stepped like a soft-padded cat on its rough old boards. And then he sat near the edge, and watched.

Deep in the water three fishes moved slowly, and paused, and moved slowly again. He dropped three crumbs: they dented the water and stayed; the fishes moved slowly, and paused. One tilted up, and waited below the crumbs; the boy waited and watched. The fish spread his jaws in a ring round the crumb, then lunged and ducked and winked under the bridge.

The fishes followed slowly and paused, and slid after him under the bridge.

The boy sat till sunset with his cheek on his knee, then left the two crumbs on the water.

He ran to the house like a rabbit, jumping and stretching and landing and gone.

"Tomorrow you must see the fishes with me, the slow, sleek fishes."

The next day they lay with their ribs against the wood of the bridge and their necks stretched over the blue. Squirrels raced and cardinals flashed by, but the children's eyes were bent to the water; for the waiting fish was a rain of bread. But the king did not come.

The girl loved the cave and the dark of the woods, and she left her brother in the sun.

When they lay on their old sagging beds that night, he told her that the king had come as the sun set. His back broke the water once--like a huge, jewelled egg. He was as long as the boy's arm, and his tail was thin like crystal. But he would take no bread.

In the morning the boy chose the softest part, the heart of the bread, and carried it in a sycamore leaf to disguise the smell of his human hand. The other fishes came like a herd of sheep; for them he had the crusts. And last of all came the king.

The boy saw what seemed to be a shadow or a stone far up the creek. Yet it moved in a line--as no shadows move. The fish broke the water for a fly; then waited beside a rock. He wound toward some minnows that scattered and trembled with fear. Thomas loved the curve of his side, the proud armoured back. He pushed the bread from the sycamore leaf.

The king prodded the bread, then took it slowly, his round, red eye fastened on Thomas. He hung in the water, only his lips and eye were alive. Then suddenly bread and fish were gone, and Thomas looked down



in the pool to its floor, his eyes spread wide and fired. Then he rolled away from the water. He lay very still on his back on the bridge, and saw a great fish swim through the sky.

Finally he could call as he lay to his sister, and soon she stood on the bank--like a shadow herself--dark and still.

"Come, Thomas, come home," she said, "you'll see the fish tomorrow."

Where could you go, boy of Alabama? You'd sold your soul to a fish in the sky, a fish of curves and of gold.

He spoke to his sister in whispered tones.

"There's a fish in the sky."

She shook her head and her braids bobbed. Down the groups of sun-bleached planks she stretched her toes--across the holes in the boards and over the water. Placing her hand on his forehead, she said, "We must not touch the fish or any life in the woods. We must keep to ourselves, to the caves and the trees, to the house and the graves."

"My palm must have the fish's back," he thought, but did not speak. And yet she knew.

So this is why you weep and why we run. Why my bare, tender feet crash through the woods, why your braids sway over my arms.

Did he tame the fish, the wild-strong-clever fish? But still she would not speak; I held her close to my heart.

Yes, he tamed the fish, the jewel and crystal fish, the golden delicate fish.

Both of them had gone back to the bridge; she, as she'd promised, and he--he as he'd promised, too.

And the old fish came--because he wanted to, and because he wanted the heart of the bread. He came last, as before, and slowly, but the old fish came to the bridge.

After many days the path to the bridge grew clear from travel, and the boy and the small dark girl would race faster than foxes and quicker than squirrels till they came to the grove of maple trees. Then they'd speak no work, but walk quietly before the bridge and the fishes and the king.

Then yesterday as they lay on the bridge, their stomachs against the boards, no fishes came. No herd of sheep, no king.

They waited in the sun. It was she who saw a slim, flat head peer out of the water, and glide across the top of the pond. Like a finger, it



cut the water, but at the bank all its length writhed up and it crawled through the reeds.

Two more appeared--he saw them, too, as they played in the water. Their heads stuck out in the air with their long bodies coiling and waving beneath. Six more came from beneath the bridge. The girl closed her eyes in fear. But the boy watched them twisting and twining like strings. He watched their ancient cleverness till the afternoon grew old. As the moon came up, the last one threaded his way through the reeds.

And the boy touched the shoulder of the girl, and very stiffly they left the boards. At the end of the broken bridge, he lifted her down to the reeds.

He took her to the cave shaped like a rose and pulled moss from the walls for her bed. And he said that they would not go home that night.

I paused in my pace for she had grown heavy as even a small child will. But she opened her eyes and gazed into mine. She had the eyes of a frightened, yearning deer that would take no rest.

"And I dreamed in the night"--she spoke--"I dreamed that Thomas ate half the bread and offered half to the fish. I dreamed of a string twined round the head of the king and of Thomas standing high on the bridge--of Thomas pulling him up from the water."

And I knew, too, as I held the child that he must not possess the fish: the fish would die, and Thomas: Thomas would be lost, too.

A thought hit my brain like a whip: I laughed in half-mad glee.

O Thomas, he can not lasso a fish, not a fish! Not a fish that swims in the sky.

The child stirred in my arms; a daisy fell from her waist.

"Put me down," she said.

So I placed her feet on the ground and straightened my back. Quicker than a squirrel she started to move, and had I not taken her hand she would have run off through the trees.

She looked at me with wild, scornful eyes, and her little soft mouth grew firm.

"Thomas will put a hook in the bread, and a string on the hook and the bread in the water. He will wait for the king and then pull."

I swooped her up in my arms and ran like a maddened bull.

We passed the house and the eighteen graves and two, we crossed the road;



and I stopped under the maple trees. Here she took my hand, and darkly we glided into the reeds, and watched.

Between the bridge and the water hung the fish, a cord drawn taut to his mouth. He made no struggle, but rose majestic and quiet.

Poor wood's child, you turn your face against me as Thomas pulls him high.

He took the fish in his hands, his fingers shoved shallowly into his scales.

Straight before him he held the fish and dislodged the hook from his mouth. He cast the string aside, and still he held the fish in the air, held him against the sky.

O damned boy of Alabama, do you think you've got his golden hide, do you think you know his curve?

At one instant the girl spun from me, her braids whizzing in the air, and I realized that Thomas was very fair, his eyes were silvery blue, his hair was gold 'gainst the sky.

Together they opened their arms in the air and from the end of the curve of Thomas's arm, fell the loosened fish; its gold disappeared in the blue.

Could you not hold a fish, beautiful, running boy?

(Leap over the holes to the boards.)

Did you think of your parents in the grave?

(Jump from the bridge for we are in the reeds.)

Did your heart's blood run cold?

(Come to your dark-haired sister.)

Was it for beauty?

Run, children, run back to your woods, run to your home beyond the graves. And I will follow more slowly.

--Sena Jeter



From my secure station I peer out
A grey and clouded window pane
Moist on the other side, drops trickling down
Their free, yet diagonal course.
While I am intact, I feel the wheels
Moving their forward course,
Jerking to abrupt starts and stops,
Yet always resuming the onward spiel.
With one casual brush of my small hand
Could I erase the haze.
But I pause in the warmth of my sheltered sphere,
As I carefully let in raw day.
Wet leaves soften the stark limbs of trees beyond,
But I will treasure the memory of their misty fronds.

--Anne Cheney



THE WALK TO OLD MORT

I took a short cut through the woods this morning, on my way to Old Mort--or Mortimer Mountain, as the sign says. I decided to take a look at the old swimming hole, since this'd be the last chance I'd ever have. I might of guessed that those Beecham kids'd be there, splashin' and hollerin'. Oh, they hid when they heard me comin', but I knew they was there. There was their clothes, all tidy under a bush. You can always tell a Beecham's clothes. Shiny and clean-colored. Even the underwear--white as purity. Just been washed fresh, no doubt. Purity-white underwear--God, it makes me mad! I took all them clothes along with me. It wouldn't hurt them Beecham kids none to have to come home naked once in their life. The rest of us ain't hardly got rags to wear at all, much less fancy-clean frillings such as those. God, it makes me mad!

Even the swimming hole wasn't what it used to be. It's gotten all dirty. Them Beecham kids is what made it dirty. Oh, they might think they're all so pretty-clean, but I know for a Goddamned fact that the swimming hole water wasn't dirty before they started swimming in it. If it was my land, I'd have told those Beecham kids to stay off from the first. But old Sheaffer ain't got good sense anyway, and he don't seem to care. It's all right with me! It ain't my land. But I know one thing--there's a hell of a lot of folks who've swum in that swimming hole all their lives who sure as hell don't like those Beecham kids messin' it up.

Hell, walking home naked might make 'em think a little--about how folks don't like outsiders comin' in and messin' up all the old places like the swimming hole. It ain't gonna hurt nobody to walk home naked. And it don't matter if it does. When you're gonna be dead before night, nothin' matters too much.

I went by to see Sheaffer, right after I left the swimming hole. He wasn't feeling good enough to laugh about the Beecham boys havin' to walk home naked. He just rocked in his chair and talked about how it was gettin' cold. It was kinda cold for summer. Ever since that Planet got in sight, the weather had been all messed up.

"Did the prediction say it'd get cold?" Sheaffer asked.

"Yeah," I said. "The radio said it'd go down to forty. That's not so bad."

"How long till the creek'll start risin'?"

That was just like old Sheaffer--still talkin' about the creek risin', as if it was just the creek that was gonna rise, and not the Mississippi



River and the Gulf of Mexico and the whole Atlantic Ocean. Sheaffer didn't seem to realize that it was only a few more hours now till we'd all be dead.

If he'd look up, he'd realize it quick. Used to be, the sky was blue all over. Now nearly a third of it's black. That's where the Planet is. You can't tell much about what the Planet's like, because the sun is back behind it. You can pick out a mountain range here and there, but most of it's pretty solid black--a rocky kind of black, to be up in the sky.

But it don't matter. Nobody'll have to look at it after today. That's because everybody'll be dead after today.

"Not too many people still around," old Sheaffer said. "Just a few. Mr. Beecham came by this morning. He said there was just a few people downtown, and Nigger Fred, and you."

"Course I'm here," I said. "Where the hell'd I be goin' to?"

"Rocky Mountains, maybe. That's where everybody else is headin' for."

I laughed pretty loud at that. "Ain't gonna do 'em any good an' they know it. I ain't headin' for anywhere but Old Mort'."

Old Sheaffer didn't understand. "I don't think Old Mort's even as tall as the Rocky Mountains, Bailey."

"Old Mort's tall enough for what I have in mind," I chuckled. Then I leaned forward in my chair, 'cause I thought what I was about to say was pretty funny. "Old Mort's tall enough to see good from. And when I heard what was gonna happen, I said to myself, I may die, and that's all right, but by God, if I'm gonna die, I'm gonna watch the Beechams die first!"

Old Sheaffer just rocked, and I couldn't hold in my laugh. He sniffed a big, long sniff. "Why you gonna do that, Bailey?"

"Cause I can't stand Beechams!" I said. I wasn't kidding. Ever since that Beecham man came with his kids and started preachin' at me, I knew I couldn't stand it forever. He thought he was so smart! Wearin' his fancy-clean clothes and bringin' his fancy-pants kids along. Thinkin' he was better than I was. Usin' big words. And then after awhile he stopped usin' big words, but he was just puttin' on. I could see it in his eyes. He'd start to say a big word, and then he'd check himself and say something else instead. He wasn't foolin' me. God, it makes me mad for somebody to think they're so smart and use big words to show up other folks. Or to put on like they don't want to use big words at all when they really do. I don't know which is worse.

"Well," I said, pickin' up the Beecham boys' shirts and underwear and socks, "I guess I better be headin' on for Old Mort."



"It won't take you long to get there," old Sheaffer said. "Why don't you stick around here longer?"

"No," I said. "I gotta go the long way by Niggertown. I know a nigger I want to give some clothes to."

I'd just thought of that idea a minute ago. What a joke on the Beechams! I'd give all their fancy-clean frillings to Nigger Fred and his boys. I could just picture those Beecham boys runnin' up naked to pa and sayin', "Oh, Pa, somebody stole our clothes!" And then here would come Nigger Fred up the road toward Forkway with his boys in those fancy-white shirts and pants! I wished I could watch it. Maybe I'd be able to see it from Old Mort. I was itchin' to get on up there right away.

I looked at old Sheaffer, there in his rocking chair. "Ain't you goin' away somewhere?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "I was thinkin' about it yesterday. The neighbors took off for the Smokies, you know. But I don't feel too good anyway, and I thought--this bein' my last day--I'd get up early and sit and watch the sun rise. Funny! I forgot all about that Thing."

And he pointed toward the east. All you could see was the big, black Planet. It was daytime, but there wasn't no sun. Just blue sky and the Thing.

"How much longer have we got, Bailey?" he asked.

I had heard it on the radio. "About two hours now."

"Wish you could stay on awhile longer."

"No, I gotta get on. I don't wanna get caught short."

So I waved good-bye and walked on. The road was the dustiest it's ever been. Something to do with the gravity on that other Planet, I think. It makes the dust hang in the air longer. It makes people lighter, too. I could tell I weighed less when I got up this morning. I liked the feeling, myself, 'cause you don't get so tired. But I did wish it'd rain and wet down the road.

Niggertown was just about empty when I got there, except for Nigger Fred's house. I knew Nigger Fred wouldn't be leavin'. For one thing, he only has one leg, so he wouldn't be walkin' far. And nobody's gonna give him any rides, 'cause he's the meanest nigger around. Even the other niggers hate him. Me, I like him okey, but that's because I don't ask no favors.

"Got some clothes for your boys, Nigger," I said, real loud. He came out of his house with his big, red crutch. He was drunk.

"We don't need no clothes, white man," he said.

"Take 'em anyway," I said. "These is Beecham's kids' clothes."



He looked at me funny. "What you doin' with those?"

"Got 'em at the swimming hole. Thought your boys might like 'em."

He shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe they would, maybe they wouldn't. My boys is gone away."

"Gone away?" I said. "Where to?"

"I dunno," he said. "Isn't there anywhere you'd like to go?"

"Hell, no!" I said. "Except Hell, maybe." I laughed pretty much at this. Fred didn't laugh. He kinda looked back at the house, like he was thinkin' about havin' another glass of something, and then he looked back at me.

"I ain't goin' to Hell, white man," he said.

"Like Hell, you ain't," I said, and laughed again.

"Mr. Beecham said I wasn't goin' to Hell. He said it this morning."

"What's the matter with you? You been 'saved'?"

"I ain't been nothing. All I know is, Mr. Beecham came by this morning and he told me I wasn't goin' to Hell. He was cryin' and laughin' at the same time."

"He sounds crazy," I said. "He better not come talkin' crazy to me."

I went on and left Fred then. Left the clothes in his yard. As I was walkin', I saw a couple of people, and they said that Beecham had talked to them too this mornin' about how they wasn't goin' to Hell after all. It sounded mighty crazy to me.

Then, as I was comin' round a bend, there sat Beecham himself on a big log. His hair was all tousled and his glasses was smudged. He looked up and saw me comin'.

"Hey, Mister Bailey!" he shouted. (Everybody else just calls me Bailey.) "I've been lookin' for you."

I didn't like him or anybody else lookin' for me. Why couldn't he mind his own business?

I thought about my joke on his boys and chuckled to myself. "I saw your kids today," I told him.

He didn't even seem to notice what I said. Usually, you could mention his boys and he was all ears right away. Wantin' to hear a lot of flattery. But today he didn't seem to care. He just said, "They oughta be home by now."



"They was at the swimming hole when I saw 'em," I said.

"Yeah," he nodded, and changed the subject. "Mr. Bailey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"I got places to go, Mr. Beecham," I said, and started to walk on. Damned if that man didn't just walk along with me.

The wind was startin' to blow pretty hard, and the dust was gettin' worse and worse. Beecham coughed a couple of times. I didn't say anything, havin' my mind on gettin' to Old Mort.

"Mr. Bailey," Beecham said, "one time I talked to you about bein' saved and goin' to heaven."

"Yeah, you did," I said. I always started feelin' a little mad inside when he started talkin' about that kind of thing--wantin' me to be saved.

He went on, "Well, I said that if you didn't get saved, you'd probably go to Hell."

"You sure did," I said. Damn it, if he didn't have the nerve.

"Well, I was wrong," he said. "You won't."

"That so?" I said. "I never really thought I was." He did get me sort of confused there, however. He didn't sound like his usual self. Maybe he was crazy.

Finally I said, "Why'd you say it, then?"

"Say what?"

"That I was goin' to Hell?"

"Well, I thought you were. But I was wrong. I've decided there isn't any Hell."

That knocked me for a loop. "When in the world did you decide that?"

"This morning," he said. "It was kind of like a vision. Only it was just suddenly knowin', that's all. All of a sudden I knew. And I wanted to tell everybody." Then he looked kind of sad. "Only, most everybody's gone. The only people I've still got to tell is my family."

"You mean you ain't told them yet?"

He smiled, still in a quiet sort of way. "I wanted to tell them the very last thing. I think that'd be the most wonderful thing in the world--to die and know you're not goin' to Hell. I didn't think they were before, but it's so wonderful to know for sure."



He sounded pretty crazy to me, so I didn't ask him any more questions. He made me kind of nervous. We just walked along. Once he said, "You say you saw my boys at the swimming hole?"

"Yeah," I said.

"They should be home by now."

By that time I had decided that my joke was pretty much shot. Nigger Fred's boys weren't around to wear Beecham's kids' clothes, and the whole business just didn't seem very funny anymore. My whole morning was generally spoiled. I looked up at the Planet. It was lookin' bigger than ever, though it wasn't so clear, there bein' a lot of dust in the air. There was a redness in the sky, too--because of the dust, I guess. Beecham looked up, too.

"How much longer?" Beecham asked.

"Forty, fifty minutes," I still had on my old watch.

The walk wasn't so tirin', since both of us were steppin' lighter than usual. Funny that that Planet up there could mess everything up so. But it had pulled the whold Pacific Ocean over all of the other side of the world, the radio said, and now it was gonna pull the Atlantic over us.

I measured Old Mort with my eye. It was a pretty big mountain. Maybe the water wouldn't get that high--

No, the radio said it would. Said it would be twice as high as Old Mort by tonight. I figured I might as well get my mind settled down to die.

Beecham didn't seem like such a terrible fella. Crazy, maybe, but not real bad crazy. Just pretty nervous. He even motioned for me to come on in when we got to his house. "We can have a big snack!" he said.

"Naw," I told him, "I gotta climb on up this here mountain."

He looked up at it pretty doubtful. "Think you might have a chance?"

I shook my head. "Naw, I just thought I'd watch . . . the sunrise."

That wasn't what I had set out to watch. I was gonna watch the Beechams get their just desserts. But even though I kept remindin' myself of that fact as I was climbin' the mountain, the whole business just didn't ring so true anymore.

Beecham's house was at the foot of Old Mort. I could hear him callin' the boys while I was climbin'. "Billy! Terry!"

The climbin' wasn't difficult because I felt so much lighter. I wasn't even breathin' hard when I got to Burtram's Ledge and sat down. The sky seemed dimmer and redder than it had been before, and the big, black Planet seemed blacker. The wind was stiff, like the radio had said it would be. The temperature must have been around forty, which is chilly for summer. I was glad I wore a long-sleeved shirt.



I heard Beecham callin' "Billy! Terry!" again. I looked at the old watch. Fifteen minutes left. I looked down at Beecham's house. What if the boys didn't get home . . . ?

Suddenly I didn't know why the hell I was sittin' there. I didn't care if the Beechams died or not. But what was different from before? I guess it's what Mr. Beecham said about not goin' to Hell. Damn it, if I wasn't goin' to Hell, it made everything all different.

"Billy! Terry!" I heard the call again.

What was I doin' here? Damn it, I was gettin' scared. The Planet seemed to be gettin' bigger and bigger all of a sudden . . .

Then it exploded. So suddenly, I almost yelled. Then I saw that it was just the sun risin'. Risin' over the Planet. Over mountains and valleys and deserts. I could see lots of 'em. They were all brown--a pretty brown, much better than black. And the sky was gettin' pinker and pinker, and then redder and redder.

"Billy! Terry!"

And then I heard something new. It was a faraway kind of roaring sound. And I saw something new. It was a reflection over toward Ashville, right on the horizon below the Planet. It looked like it looks when you're just comin' in sight of a big lake. Only it was the biggest lake I've ever seen.

"Billy! Terry!"

I could tell by Mr. Beecham's voice that he could hear the sound comin'. Before long, he'd be seein' what I saw. The roar of it all was gettin' louder and louder. Near the horizon you could see the mountains and valleys of the Planet reflected. The water closer up was white and choppy.

I could see the swimming hole from where I was. The Beecham boys weren't there anymore. Maybe they were on the road . . .

I hadn't known it was gonna come so fast when it came. You wouldn't believe how fast it was comin'.

"Mr. Beecham!" I screamed. "The water's comin'! The water's comin'!"

Him and his wife were both outside now. They couldn't hear me 'cause they were calling.

They both looked so scared. He hadn't looked scared before. I wondered if the boys were scared.

It took just a few seconds between the time the water hit town and the time it hit Beecham's house. And I was runnin' as hard as I could, screamin' and cryin', higher and higher up the side of Mortimer Mountain. I was all hysterical.



But I'm not hysterical anymore. I just wish those boys had known they wasn't goin' to Hell.

The sky is still rosy, but it's movin' toward blue. No clouds, still. The Planet gets beautifuller and beautifuller. There's green on it, and some nice yellow. And it's all reflected in the biggest lake I guess I've ever seen.

--Howard Cruse



SONNET: ON SENTIMENTALITY

The B-note thrusts an arm to either side
And pulls itself from 'twixt B-flat and C:
The first strain of my winding symphony,
Piercing, alone, and wishing it could hide.
As each successive Lethe-let springs through,
The gap is widened; room is made for those
Too shy to come alone from out the rows
To hide within the group, in one great blue
Shudder of Soul---As one might write himself
Within a book, concealing from his peers
The sad identities of lumb'ring years
Who march out from the pages as if hours,
Or tasteless drops amid the sweets and sours...
A symphony condemned to swim in tears.

--David C. Vest



EX LIBRIS

In the Beginning day of my infinite substance,
 I entered the circle of the cycle--ushered by Darwin,
 Who had made the key from unbiased sea-water,
 With help from God, who was, at first, skeptical.

The axle is greased by the blood of His Son.
 (Who knew the mythology of the Romans)
 The axle is turned by the blood of Einstein.
 (The Dead Sea Scrolls state that $e = mc^2$)

Footprints of monkeys and humans litter the beach
 Where there are signs of a violent breach,
 And the remains of two people, side by side,
 Who, in loneliness, committed suicide.

The Rain will wash it all away.
 The Rain will wash it all away.
 And we, being born in a later day,
 Can never know it happened that way.

Ignorance is the Birth of thought!
 Knowledge is the Death of thought!

-- Phil Irick



CONDITIONED RESPONSE

Characters: YOUNG MAN

OLD MAN

Time: The present.

The scene is a small room in a dingy, low-class hotel. There is a single brass rail bed upstage left. Downstage and a little left of the bed is a simple wooden chair. Against the wall, stage right, there is a beat-up writing table with a telephone on it. Right center there is a door leading into the hallway. Just to the right of the door there is a Muzak speaker on the wall. It is of the type frequently found in motels and hotels. The set should be realistic. The furniture should be worn out and the paint peeling from the walls. The bed is sloppily made and is covered by a loud orange spread. A light bulb hangs from a cord in the center of the room.

The YOUNG MAN is dressed in faded blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He is heavy-set. The OLD MAN is dressed in baggy pants, dingy white shirt, and wrinkled coat. He is small and stooped.

The YOUNG MAN enters carrying a beat-up suitcase. He is followed by the OLD MAN who closes the door behind him.

The YOUNG MAN goes to the light cord and turns the light on. Both characters then proceed to examine the room.

The YOUNG MAN goes to the table, rubs his finger across it, and wipes the dust on his shirt. Meanwhile, the OLD MAN has gone to the bed. He presses the mattress to test it.

OLD MAN

(With a nervous laugh) There's not much furniture in here, is there?

YOUNG MAN

(In a self-confident, nonchalant tone) This is the only room they had.

The YOUNG MAN crosses to the bed, sets his suitcase beside it, sits on the bed, and begins to take off his shoes. This action happens so quickly that the OLD MAN is astonished.

OLD MAN

Are you sleeping in this?

YOUNG MAN

(Without feeling) Of course.

OLD MAN

Where am I going to sleep?

The YOUNG MAN crawls under the cover and turns his back to the OLD MAN. He does not answer.

OLD MAN

(Moves closer to bed. He repeats the question more loudly) Where am I going to sleep?

There is no answer.

The OLD MAN thinks, looks about, and sees the telephone.

OLD MAN

(To himself) I guess I'll have to have another one of those sent up (Pointing at the bed).

The OLD MAN goes to the phone and picks up the receiver. There is no answer. He clicks the receiver. There is still no answer. He hangs up.

He pauses a second, then goes to the door. He pulls the handle. The door doesn't open.

Beginning to get irritated, the OLD MAN goes to the bed and starts to speak, but sees that the YOUNG MAN is sleeping soundly.

The OLD MAN goes back to the door, pulls the handle. It doesn't open.

He goes to the phone and picks up the receiver. There is no answer. He clicks the receiver. There is still no answer.

Frustrated, the OLD MAN crosses to the chair at stage left and sits.'

Silence.

Honky-tonk music softly fades in from the Muzak speaker. The OLD MAN looks at the speaker. The music gets louder.

The OLD MAN gets up, crosses to the speaker, and fumbles with the volume control. The music continues to get louder.

The YOUNG MAN sits up and watches the OLD MAN fumbling with the speaker. The YOUNG MAN gets up, goes to the speaker, and hits it. The music instantly stops. The YOUNG MAN stares at the OLD MAN, then crosses back to the bed, sits, brushes off his feet, and goes back to sleep.

The OLD MAN is staring at the speaker. He looks at the YOUNG MAN, looks back at the speaker, and turns the knob. Nothing happens.

The OLD MAN goes to the phone, picks up the receiver. There is no answer. He clicks the receiver. There is still no answer.

Completely baffled, he goes back to the chair and sits.

Silence.

The music starts again. The OLD MAN looks at the speaker. The music gets louder. He looks at the YOUNG MAN. He quickly crosses to the speaker and turns the knob. Nothing happens. He hits the speaker. The music suddenly comes on full volume. He jumps back in fear.

The YOUNG MAN gets up and disgustedly crosses to the speaker. He turns the knob and the music fades out. He stares at the OLD MAN, then crosses back to the bed, sits, brushes off his feet, and goes back to sleep.

The OLD MAN stares at the speaker and back at the YOUNG MAN. He goes to the speaker and turns the knob. Nothing happens.

He goes to the phone and picks up the receiver. There is no answer. He shouts in anguish as he clicks the receiver.

OLD MAN

Hello! Hello!

There is no answer. He slams down the phone and runs to the door. He frantically pulls the handle. The door doesn't open.

He has worked himself into a frenzy of animal noises and running from phone to door. Finally exhausted, the OLD MAN stands in the center of the room breathing heavily. He looks about. He goes to the chair and sits with his face in his hands.

Silence.

The OLD MAN slowly looks up and turns toward the speaker. It is silent.

He gets up slowly and tip-toes toward the door. The YOUNG MAN groans in his sleep. This startles the OLD MAN who stops dead in his tracks.

The OLD MAN waits a moment. All is quiet. He continues to tip-toe toward the door as if he were sneaking up on it.

Suddenly he lunges at the door and grabs the handle. He pulls frantically, but the door won't open. He looks back to see if the YOUNG MAN is still sleeping, then he tip-toes back to the chair and sits.

Silence.

The telephone rings.

The OLD MAN looks up, hesitates, and dashes to the phone. It stops ringing before he gets there. He dejectedly picks up the receiver. There is no answer. He goes back to the chair and sits.

Silence.

The telephone rings.

The OLD MAN jumps up and rushes to the phone.

OLD MAN
(Expecting an answer) Hello! Hello!

There is no answer.

He replaces the receiver, stares at the phone, stares at the door, then goes back to the chair.

Silence.

The telephone rings.

The OLD MAN looks at the phone but doesn't move. The telephone continues to ring. The OLD MAN stands, but doesn't move toward the phone.

The YOUNG MAN gets up and goes to the telephone.

YOUNG MAN
Hello. (Pause)
Who? (Pause)
Oh. No, everything is fine. We don't need anything. (Pause)
Thank you. (He hangs up.)

The OLD MAN has been watching in disbelief. He has moved closer to the phone. As the YOUNG MAN returns to the bed, they confront each other. There is a short pause, then the YOUNG MAN goes to the bed, sits, brushes off his feet, and goes back to sleep.

The OLD MAN looks at the YOUNG MAN and back at the phone. He leaps at the phone and grabs the receiver.

OLD MAN
Hello! Hello!

There is no answer. He clicks the receiver and shouts louder.

Hello! Hello!

He slams the phone down, runs to the door, and pulls the handle. The door won't open. He kicks the door and pulls again. The door still doesn't open.

Dejected, he starts toward the chair. He gets to the chair, looks at it, kicks it, raises his shoulders heroically, folds his arms, and sits on the floor.

Soft, dreamy flute music begins to fade in from the speaker. The OLD MAN slowly turns toward the speaker as the lights fade out.

CURTAIN

--Phil Irick

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